

IMPRESSIONS

Lord Curzon remains one of the more significant of figures in the history of British colonial rule in India. Having served as Viceroy and Governor General of India between 1899 and 1905, he reflected on his impressions of the country in a combination of the serious and the comic. In the following article (which was originally published by Sidgewick & Jackson, London, in 1984 and which we will print in installments and in the historical interest) he comes forth with his opinions in a manner which amuses as well as worries, depending on how you look at the manner of narration. Star Literature expresses its thanks to Mahbub Alam, former ambassador-cum-literary aesthete, for making the article available to its readers.

Inscriptions and petitions

MARQUESS CURZON OF KEDLESTON

To speak agreeably to him with whom we deal is more than to speak in good words or in good order. --- Bacon, *Of Discourse*.

The Indians excel in street decoration, illuminations, and every form of ceremonial observance. When the Viceroy or a Governor proceeds upon tour, still more of course if a member of the Royal House visits India, he passes through streets fantastically adorned, and under triumphal arches, built of the slenderest materials (very often little more than bamboo), but often decorated with the greatest ingenuity and taste. A feature of these arches is the inscriptions with which they are as a rule embellished, and the composition of which affords a much-valued scope for the talents of the local babu or university student, who may possess a smattering of European or even classical knowledge, and who is appealed to for a scholarly composition of words. I recall certain of these inscriptions under which I passed in the course of my official tours.

In some cases there would be a half-conscious reflection of the Prayer Book or the Scriptures. It is true that I was spared the particular welcome that was extended to an unusually ugly Governor, who, on leaving the railway station, read in gigantic characters over the gateway the inscription:

*Good Lord! Deliver us!*  
But at Malda I was welcomed by the words:  
*Blessed be our Lord;*  
While at Burdwan the local scholar had even dipped into the Vulgate:  
*Welcome our Lord*  
*Nisi Dominus frustra.*

Elsewhere, an inscription in the vernacular must, I think, have been a quotation from one of the Indian Sacred Books, for it ran when translated:

*Rejoice, O Heart, in the advent of Messiah-like being, representing a nobler one.*

At Chittagong, my dress, which so far as I remember was ordinary mufti, received an ambiguous but wholly unmerited compliment:

*He cometh as a bridegroom*  
*Clad in the garment of love.*  
Sometimes the Sovereign would be acclaimed in the same breath as his representative. For instance, Murshedabad thus addressed me:  
*Vive l'Empereur and Viceroy.*



Lord Curzon

*Hail gracious Lord.*  
On the other hand, at Trichinopoli I drove under the following:

*Welcome, our future Emperor.*  
Any alarm that I might have felt at being regarded as a pretender was, however, removed by the assurance that this particular inscription had been prepared many years before for the Duke of Clarence when he visited Southern India, and that it was pulled out again from time to time, if ever the Viceroy appeared on the scene. At Jeypore an accidental misspacing of the words converted.

*A Gala Day*  
into  
*A Gal a Day*  
which sounded rather naughty.

But it was when, in deference to my assumed academic reputation, resort was had to the classics, that some of the best efforts were forthcoming. Thus at Azimgunje I was welcomed by:

*Vive, Vale.*  
At Manipur there was a fine combination both of language and sentiment:  
*Bonjour! Bon Soir!*  
*Vive l'Empereur,*  
*Fidus Achates.*

This reminds me of a dinner I once gave in London to an Oriental potentate who knew a little French but no English, and who, as I parted with him at the door,

exclaimed: 'Bon Soir, Bien, Merci, Tres fatigue'.

At Sivasamudram a more practical turn was given to the exhortation:

*Gloria in excelsis*  
*Be ever healthy.*  
At Madura, where I was welcomed on one archway to

*The Athens of Southern India,*  
another said:  
*Adieu the successful Fighter of Famin.*

But the salutation which struck the homeliest note and gave me perhaps the greatest pleasure was that of Karachi:

*Hail Overworked Viceroy,*  
*Karachi wants more Curzons.*

It is, however, in letters, appeals, and petitions, of which the Viceroy receives many scores weekly, that some of the greatest triumphs are achieved. My private secretaries used to paste the best of these into an album, which I still possess, and a few of the gems of which I will here extract. It must not be supposed, if I, or any one else, quote amusing specimens of what is commonly known as Babu English, that we do it with any idea of deriding the native intelligence, or of poking fun at its errors. On the contrary, one of the most remarkable experiences in India is the astonishing command of the English language --- to them a foreign tongue --- that is acquired by the better-educated Indians, enabling them not merely to write, but to speak it with an accuracy and a fluency at which I never ceased to wonder.

(The blunders and absurdities that find a frequent place in the Indian Press are cited both because they strike a note of gaiety in the rather dull routine of Indian official life, and, still more, because they often reveal a sense of humour on the part of the writers that is both quaint and refreshing. It is in this spirit only that I reproduce a number of extracts from my own collection).

The cause of education seemed to spur the inscription writers to their best efforts. The High School at Bikanir thus addressed me in language the sentiment of which was unimpeachable even if the expression was somewhat obscure:

*Fulls wells the fountain of true fealty here*  
*To hail Your Excellencies' advent dear.*  
*Live I so live I*  
*To my King faithfully.*  
*Live I so live I*

*To my Lord heartily.*

On one of the walls at the High Schools at Dhar I read the rather enigmatic gloss on a familiar precept:  
*Spare the rod --- spoil the child*

*No pains*  
*No cains*

Sometimes the universal Anglo-Indian custom of condensing composite official titles into initials (for instance 'Agent to the Governor-General' became AGG) operates as a snare, for on one occasion a very popular political officer, on returning from leave, to the state to which he was accredited, found the welcome extended to him on a triumphal arch expressed in the following abbreviated from:

*Let us give a big WC*  
*To our popular AGG!*

I had one correspondent, who claimed to be the legitimate heir to the Native State of which his ancestors had been dispossessed, and to which he apparently expected to be restored. He always addressed me as 'your afflicted and distressed', or as 'your affectionate, humble, and beloved child'. He would always inquire kindly after my own family, who were quite juvenile, but whom he persisted in describing as my 'venerable children'. Perhaps the best among his many productions was one in which he explained his apparent failure to see me when I visited the town in which he resided.

'I wrote to Mr. A ----- to procure me interview with your Sublime Lordship. Although he is very aptitude, theological, polite, susceptible, and temporizing, yet he did not fulfil the desire of the Royal blood. When your susceptible Lordship was at the Judge's Bungalow, I wrote again. What I heard of your super-fine Lordship's conduct, the same I have seen from the balcony of my liberal Highness father. Your inimitable Lordship returned the complements of thousands of people that were standing on the street, but my fortune was such that I could not play before your sumptuous Lordship upon my invaluable lute, which will be very relicious to the ear to hear . . . . I hope that your transient lordship will keep your benevolent golden view on the forlorn royal blood to ennoble and preserve the dignity of His Highness father in sending the blessing letter of the golden hands.'

THE SECOND INSTALLMENT OF THE ARTICLE WILL APPEAR NEXT WEEK.

REFLECTIONS

Alien in one's own country

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

I have a growing feeling these days that I am getting gradually alienated from my own society and culture. Some kind of strangeness has surrounded me since long. Or has it invaded my own small world, comprising my thoughts, emotions and actions? It is strange because it is different, rather very much different, may be absolutely new, but certainly it is a changed phenomenon in one's life. However, change being a normal occurrence is expected to bring better results, improvements and all in the positive direction, looked upon as a boon in society. An opposite direction of it certainly cannot be welcome, however large a segment of society may fall for it. Then again, speaking practically, infiltration of one or two not so desirable things may perhaps be seen as small instances of cultural intrusion that no culture is immune to. But when all-out change in various walks of life shows itself with much force and is capable of metamorphosing the fabric of one's culture and society, one cannot but experience a vortex of emotions -- a whirlwind ready to make one frustrated and depressed.

A sense of alienation grips the psyche. Such strange things with which one cannot come to terms act as irritants at first in the cognitive domain, to be expressed in one's emotions and attitudes consequently. A list of some such irritants these days can be rather long and chaotic, depending on the sensitivity of the mind receiving it. For me, they are already too many to bear. At this stage, one's personal likes and dislikes keep on shuffling and re-shuffling, revealing to one's amazement how much they govern our life to which we normally remain oblivious. It is highly probable that in case the menu on one's dislike of certain components of fast evolving present day culture is lengthy, one would experience a con-

flikt with society at large or, in extreme situations, one would opt for a withdrawal from the irritants. In both cases, one would very likely consider oneself a social misfit. Older people belonging to old schools of thought suffer most as they feel that they have been put on a real rollercoaster they cannot cope with in terms of their scale of appreciation. It turns out to be 'odd men out' for them. A certain clash of cultures emerges, delineating the multiple facets of it. It is, therefore, perceived that our ill-defined culture that we see at present does not mirror us any more and is much removed from us.

Our world view has been passing through numerous aberrations. To our dismay, we see that it is not only our beliefs, values, habits and languages but also our lifestyles, our landscapes, skyline, our modes of relationships which have all taken a different look and thereby assumed altogether different meanings. As examples of such neo-cultural behavior are aplenty so are their explanations in terms of psycho-socio-economic rationales. Right from post fixing or apposition of nicknames along with one's official name to any practice that one can imagine is reflected a mentality that is anything but normal. Did we ever see it before? Just imagine: if nicknames were thus fixed after the great names in history, how would have those sounded and what would have been our reactions? Awe or fun? The psychological explanation that can safely be put forward here is that it is nothing but one's motive of standing out from the others. But "what's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet"., so said Shakespeare. Similarly, a person normally is to be recognised by his or her work. In other words, on his or her own merit. Making a pet name public is not a sign of good taste, for it eventually opens the floodgates to all kinds of funny names. The line between something



private and public gets blurred. Our impressions get tainted.

Another bizarre kind of thing that has acquired impetus from our own taste and fascination for it is the state of the Bengali language that we have been acquainted with for quite a long time. The peculiarly fashionable pronunciation that has been invented, using very ordinary words from English in place of Bengali words as if there are not any words equivalent to those in Bengali, are only a few examples of the extremely morbid state that Bengali is in in Bangladesh. We are, therefore, confronted with Bengali as a hybrid language in an atmosphere of a thriving third culture operated neither by Bengali nor English nor Hindi-Urdu but by a fusion of something from all. And by the way, this fusion is the byword for our modern day music as well. Private

radio stations in particular have taken up this solemn duty of producing great linguists fit for the 21st century. The reason for such behaviour is not far fetched. It is simply to draw the immediate attention of listeners by using the magical spell of a 'glamorous' kind of language, whatever that might be. And the motive is purely commercial, that is, devoid of a minimum sense of aesthetics. As they speak Bengali, it sounds as if they are straining their vocal chords and tongues. So much for our love and concern for Bengali. We pour it out profusely only on 21 February every year. It has become a celebration sans essence, just the same that we find in naming cassettes and CDs that are quite a mouthful compared to the aesthetic quality that they present in terms of everything they are supposed to be.

Superficiality and haste have been the two guiding principles of our definition and concept of cultural occupations which have corroded the characteristics of words such as perseverance, hard work and tenacity, thereby betraying the normal shape of the learning curve. There is an awfully terrible rush for getting known as a singer, actor, dancer, poet, writer, maybe a painter as well, so much so that such individuals cannot wait for a certain period for learning, refining and internalising something learnt. An egoistic psychology is overwhelming. Quick and cheap popularity drives them to utter craziness. This behavioural pattern has a direct link to what we have been hearing these days in the name of songs, notwithstanding the lyrics that claim to be 'oriented towards life'.

Screaming and shrieking turn such songs into a belligerent rendering of songs. Some so-called love songs fall into this category. It is overwhelming for one's ears and fine sensibilities in terms of its ubiquity and it is being sung by all and sundry. As if that were not enough, adding insult to injury, martial styles of dance are added to them. Whatever presentations those are, from the beginning to the end and thereafter an image of acrobatics of singing and dancing remains with us, the spectators. No rudiments of fine arts are left on our mental screen.

The onslaught of cultural decay is starkly evident in our urban settings too. That will undoubtedly arouse the interest of urban anthropologists as is manifest in our relentless practice of destruction and re-construction of buildings with total disregard to civic and ethical norms. Economic considerations being the prime mover in this policy, everything else is either of minor importance or no importance at all. With high-rise structures jamming our skyline, jamming our vision, one has to be quite a skillful strategist, somewhat akin to what is demanded of one in a battlefield in order for one

to spot the beautifully luminous moon that has become a rarity these days. And the lessons? We shall live as packed as sardines in an eternal inferno of noise and chaos where even the fanciful names of buildings cannot appease us. The cavalcade of personal clothing and household linen hung from these high-rise buildings for public viewing is perhaps the ugliest sight in what has already been declared as the dirtiest capital city in the world. Only divinity knows what other commendations are in store for us!

Life has been full of anomalies for us in our own country. It has reached a peak with a 'brilliant invention' of the history of our Liberation War. It is not only that they 'successfully' made it up. Worse is that they have left and are leaving a legacy of falsehood for brainwashing the younger generation. This is a glaring example of creating a neo-culture through fabrication that suits a particular segment of society. An egoistic philosophy fashioned on a collective level indeed!

Riding on its fast, resplendent wings, life these days gallops into numerous directions where the goals are short-term and ephemeral. Everything here is done for immediate returns. Speed defines every kind of activity where quality, authenticity and permanence are a secondary concern. In its abnormal haste, in its dizzying course of travel and in its self-fulfilling prophecy of turning untruth into truth, life keeps on shedding its simplicity, beauty and grandeur losing quietude, serenity and ultimately the peace that every human life is meant to be lived in.

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The short story, 'A meal at a Chinese restaurant', will appear next week